

Researching Translation Studies: The Case for Doctoral Research

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For a subject to move forward, there must be doctoral research. This proposition was first put to me twenty years ago by colleagues opposed to the advent of Film and Media Studies and Women's Studies on the university scene. These were new subjects, it was stated, they were interdisciplinary, they had no established history of research and therefore they should have no place in the academy. I campaigned as virulently as others of my generation for their inclusion, arguing that all new subjects should be given their chance, that interdisciplinarity was the road to the future and the body of scholarship that has since developed is evidence of the strength of our cause.

These days, I find myself using the same argument as those elderly colleagues of two decades ago, with regard to Translation Studies. The difference, however, is that I am not endeavouring to keep an interdisciplinary field out on the pretext that only "true" single subject disciplines are proper to the academy, but rather that I believe there is some validity to the notion that for a subject to move forward, there needs to be a body of research to assist it. Translation Studies has been developing internationally at such a rapid rate in the last 10-15 years, as testified to by the proliferation of books, journals, conferences and associations, that it is a timely moment to ask questions about the current state of research in the field.

Edwin Genztler (1993:1) notes that the field of "translation theory" has only had a separate listing in the *Modern Language Association International Bibliography* since 1983. However, the shift towards a subject called "Translation Studies" happened relatively quickly, and may be seen as a movement that began to articulate its programme in the early 1970s. For

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translation theory to receive a PMLA listing in 1983, given the vagueness of the subject as a whole a decade earlier is significant, an indicator of the progress of this field of study towards becoming a discipline in its own right. The number of courses taught at different levels around the world today surely suggests that it has indeed become a discipline.

Polysystems Theory and Beyond

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A crucial factor in the development of the subject was the advent of polysystems theory, and its adoption in various forms by a wide range of scholars, critics and practitioners. What the polysystems approach offered was the reintroduction of questions of ideology into the study and practice of translation, by examining the processes of textual transfer across cultural boundaries and studying the ways in which texts and their translators were accepted or marginalised by different literary systems.

In my own case, polysystems theory, as expounded by Itamar Even-Zohar, Gideon Toury, James Holmes and Anton Popovic provided the opportunity I needed to advance my own work on translation. From exclusively practical beginnings, working as a translator and interpreter, I found myself able to investigate not only the criteria used by translators in daily practice, but also the wider contextual issues that condition the production of a translation. The beauty of the polysystems approach was its (in those days) curious mixture of formalist and Marxist methods: on the one hand, it advocated minute textual study that owed a great deal to the Russian Formalists and Czech Structuralists, whilst on the other hand it concerned itself with cultural history, cultural policy and economics.

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The 1976 Leuven conference on literary translation, that many of us see as a watershed event, brought together a mixed group of scholars, all of whom had extensive backgrounds in translation practice and all of whom wanted a more systematic and coherent approach to the study of translation. There was a general sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo; linguists felt that most of the work on translation was being carried out in isolation and was devoid of a contextual frame, while literary scholars felt that translation was treated as a poor relation in literary studies generally. Where translation criticism appeared, it consisted for the most part of evaluating translations of literary texts against one another. The group took a strong line against evaluative criticism and argued that theory should be linked to practice. Significantly, there was general

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consensus that the history of translation needed to be reassessed, for the writing of literary histories had so often ignored translation altogether or treated it a second-rate activity, below the status of “original” work. André Lefevere was entrusted with the production of a short manifesto statement, that was included in the published conference proceedings and defined the goal of Translation Studies as follows (Lefevere 1978:234):

The goal of the discipline is to produce a comprehensive theory which can be used as a guideline for the production of translations. The theory would gain by being developed along lines of argument which are neither neopositivistic nor hermeneutic in inspiration. The theory would gain by being elaborated against a background of, and constantly tested by case-histories. The theory would then not be static; ... It is not inconceivable that a theory elaborated in this way might be of help in the formulation of literary and linguistic theory; just as it is not inconceivable that translations made according to the guidelines tentatively laid down in the theory might influence the development of the receiving culture.

With hindsight, this manifesto seems excessively idealistic, and Lefevere's position has since been modified. But nevertheless, there are still some important points that this statement raises: translation theory is to be neither neopositivistic nor hermeneutic, it is to be elaborated against a background of case-studies, i.e. solid historical research, and just as theory emerges from translation practice, so translation practice may be helped by the guidelines laid down by the theory. Since the Leuven group came together, united in protest against the divisive nature of the theory-versus-practice view of the world, it was clear that a principal brief was the eradication of that division. That it still exists is unfortunate for all concerned, but as the subject continues to develop, hopefully the split will continue to narrow.

The polysystems approach has been criticised for placing too much emphasis on the target culture, for seeking to examine the processes of transfer at the expense of detailed study of the source text, for being too overtly concerned with questions of ideology rather than questions of aesthetics or value. It has also been accused of focusing on the translation of literary texts at the expense of other types of text. These are criticisms that require recording here, but it is important to remember that the ideas of the polysystems group as first expressed belong to a particular moment in literary history. Work in the field of translation in the early 1970s was hopelessly amateurish, unsystematic and decontextualised. While literary analysis moved through a rapid series of

exciting phases, from Barthean structuralism to deconstruction, from early feminism to gender studies, from Adornian Marxism to New Historicism and cultural materialism, scholars continued to talk about translation as though it were an activity for idiots. Discussions of translation produced a schizophrenic discourse; frequently the same scholars whose literary analysis was at the cutting edge of new debate would talk about translation in outmoded terms. Whilst questions of evaluation were disappearing from the scene in literary studies generally, as the canon was called into question and new modes of reading deconstructed the authority of the author and challenged the concept of the single “correct” reading, they were still applied where translations were concerned. The polystems approach, with its insistence on history and its requirement that the cultural processes governing the choices made by translators in their selection of linguistic items be made an object of study needs to be considered in context. What it did was to give Translation Studies greater status within literary studies as a whole, and began the process of bringing translations in from the margins where they could be properly considered alongside all other texts within a literary system.

Three Decades of Translation Studies

If we go back to the early work in translation in the 1960s, to such inspiring scholars as Eugene Nida and J.C. Catford, it becomes possible to trace the lines of progression across a thirty year period. Edwin Gentzler’s useful account of contemporary translation theories recognises the debt later scholars owed to Nida’s work in the field of Bible translation and his development of the “science of translation”. He suggests that Nida’s work has had special impact in Germany, influencing such theorists as Wolfram Wilss, Katharina Reiss, the Leipzig school and more recently Mary Snell-Hornby and Hans Vermeer (see Wilss 1982, Reiss and Vermeer 1984, Snell-Hornby 1988). It would be interesting to compare the different ways in which Nida’s work has been utilised in the English and German speaking worlds, and to examine the points of similarity and divergence. Comparative translation theory is still in its infancy, but there is a great deal of useful work that remains to be done.

One simple way of understanding some of the changes and developments in the study of translation since the 1960s is through the application of keywords to specific periods. Following this principle, we find that the keyword of the decade from c. 1965 to 1975 is *equivalence*. This

vexatious term occupied much of the time of translation scholars, as they struggled to come to terms with notions of equivalence that recognised the flexibility and individuality of linguistic systems. The most extreme position was that proposed by proponents of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, of which group I count myself, which argued that languages reflect different world-views. Catford (1965), following Jakobson, argued that what happens in translation is the substitution of TL meanings, not their transference. Nida (1964) proposed his theory of two types of equivalence, *formal* and *dynamic*, that was developed in the 1980s by Reiss and Vermeer into *skopos* theory. What all these different attempts to define equivalence share is the sense that fixed, immutable notions of equivalence as sameness across languages are untenable. Once equivalence could be seen to be a shifting concept, where the function of the text was as significant as the text itself, then the old discourse of “faithful” and “unfaithful” translations ceased to have much significance. Here, of course, literary translation lagged behind technical translation, for it had long been established practice for translators to take a functional or *skopos* oriented approach. When translating an instruction manual, for example, faithfulness to the SL text as text is subordinated to faithfulness to the purpose of the instructions and the code and conventions within which such a text is expressed in the TL. The problem arises if the literary text is given special status, and here the work of scholars such as Nida coming from one position and James Holmes coming from a completely different position, both ideologically and practically, began to come together.

In the 1970s the keyword is *history*. The gradual spread of polysystems-inspired thinking led to a surge of interest in the origins of translation theory and the practice of earlier translators. A number of useful books appeared that supplied readers with primary sources as well as informed comment, and this trend has continued (see Lefevere 1977, Steiner 1975, Schulte and Biguenet eds 1992). It was during this period that doctoral work on translation history began to develop, and I would still argue that this is one of the most crucial fields for further development. A better understanding of the genealogy of translation theory and practice can help move the subject forward, and can also help us to have a clearer picture of how translation came to decline in status from the C17th onwards, after being considered a vital literary activity for centuries previously.

A rich field to be explored further are the statements made by translators, not only in prefaces to editions but in letters and journals. Reading Ezra Pound's letters, for example, we have a sense of how he worked, and in the comments he made to friends we can see through to the translator's working

methods. This type of text has received relatively little attention until recently, having been judged as marginalia, but in terms of mapping out the strategies used by translators in order to have some idea of the criteria employed by given cultures at given moments in time, all texts that shed light on the translation process are important. We know surprisingly little about the working methods of many translators, and an examination of diaries and letters often proves extremely valuable.

In the mid-1980s another keyword came to prominence: *culture*. Bassnett and Lefevere (1991/1995) argued that translation had undergone a “cultural turn” as issues of context dominated discussions. Translation Studies had begun to move closer to Cultural Studies, as it increasingly incorporated ethnographical and anthropological methods. Moreover, with the growth of research into post-colonialism, the 1980s saw a range of research investigating the connection between translation practice, Eurocentrism and colonial models. Tejaswini Niranjana’s splendid book *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context* (1992:5) sums up a powerful line in post-colonial Translation Studies discourse when she argues that:

In creating coherent and transparent texts and subjects, translation participates - across a range of discourses - in the *fixing* of colonized cultures, making them seem static and unchanging rather than historically constructed ... Translation is thus deployed in different kinds of discourses - philosophy, historiography, education, missionary writings, travel-writing - to renew and perpetuate colonial domination.

Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (1994:6) have recently argued that post-colonial critics are engaged in a kind of quest, to “defeat, escape or circumvent” the pattern of binary oppositions that is fundamental to Western thought. Brazilian translation scholars have tackled precisely this question in terms of translation, challenging the binary that contrasts the translation with the original. The supremacy of the original, that we now know develops in the C17th leads to a reduction in status of the other partner, the translation. In post-colonial terms, this can be compared to the power of European models over their colonial “copies”, hence a rejection of the hegemony of Europe must also involve a rejection of the hegemony of the “original”. There is a lot of research currently under way, that seeks to explore further these issues. In India, Latin America, Brazil, Africa and Canada there are groups studying the colonial implications of translation practice, and proposing alternatives (see Bassnett and Trivedi eds 1998).

A similar process can be discerned in research in Gender Studies, and another aspect of the cultural turn of the 1980s has been an increase of interest in questions of translation and gender. Here also a significant development is the rejection of binaries. Following French feminist theory, the concept of the masculine-feminine binary has been challenged. Lori Chamberlain's brilliant essay (1988/1992) demonstrates the sexism inherent in the concept of the *belles infidèles*, which is posited on the principles of the husband, the superior partner, equated with the original, and the inferior wife with the translation.

The keyword of the 1990s, which follows on from the cultural turn is surely *visibility*. Lawrence Venuti has shown how the translator is becoming more visible, no longer perceived as the second-rate hack, paid considerably less than the original author and often not even credited. He argues that translators' contracts since the 1980s "show an increasing recognition of the translator's crucial role in the production of the translation" (1994:10, see also Simon 1996). The visibility of the translator is linked not only to economic changes, to increased globalisation and hence greater need for information that can cross linguistic and cultural frontiers, but to a change in the status of translation itself. Once we begin to be more directly concerned with *how* translation happens, with *why* it happens, and *when*, and *for whom* or *for what purpose*, once we begin to examine all these questions from a multiplicity of standpoints, then inevitably the translator becomes more visible.

Translation, Reading and Assessment

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In her keynote address to the Warwick ITI conference on literary translation in December 1994, Suzanne Jill Levine pointed out that studying the processes of translation is often more interesting than studying the final product. This, of course, is exactly what Translation Studies does, for the object of study is the process, on the microlevel in terms of the language of the SL and TL texts and on the macrolevel in terms of the context in which both those texts are embedded. This is the crucial difference between Translation Studies and Translation as taught within a language learning programme, for in the latter case the emphasis is primarily on the product, since it is by comparing the product with the SL text that language competence can be assessed.

Suzanne Jill Levine also pointed out that translation offers a crucial lesson in how to read. "Translation is a critical way into the text", she suggests. This argument is closely paralleled with the case that has been made for the

importance of creative writing in academia; talent (whatever that may mean) cannot be taught, but skills can, and the greatest achievement of a successful creative writing course is to teach people to become sensitive and sensitised readers.

Discussion of the difficulties of evaluating translation work have shown close similarities with discussions about the problem of assessing creative writing. It is sometimes argued that it is impossible to assess any kind of creative work, because responses are entirely subjective. I have always disagreed with this view; if we consider ourselves to be critics, then we should be able to assess a collection of poetry by a student in the same way as we assess a collection by a renowned poet, particularly when that work is framed by the student's commentary on his or her own work. It is the same with translation; at Warwick we allow MA and PhD students to submit their own original translation work as part of their dissertation, along with a detailed commentary and notes. Indeed, such projects that involve a practical dimension are actively encouraged.

Assessment of research is necessarily different from assessment of translator training exercises. What is assessed is the candidate's knowledge of the wider field, along with his or her technique in translating a text and providing detailed information on the process. In short, what is assessed are the translation strategies and the candidate's self-awareness and ability to reflect upon his or her own working processes. As an academic exercise, this is both respectable and demanding, and I refute any suggestion that research in Translation Studies that may involve a practical element is any less rigorous than any other kind of research in the humanities.

The Warwick Approach

I have been arguing that Translation Studies is a very broad field, and indeed could even be renamed "Intercultural Studies", given its concern with the study of the transfer processes across cultures. The Warwick approach is consciously wide-ranging, as may be seen by the titles of some of the recent PhDs awarded, which include such topics as:

- *Translating Poetic Metaphor: Explorations of the Processes of Translation;*
- *Amlethus-Ambleto-Hamlet-Amleto: The Hamlet Story in C18th Italy;*
- *Towards a Model of the Translation of African Literature from French into English;*
- *Problems of Translating Malaysian Poetry;*
- *Representations of the East in English and French Travel Writing 1798-1882;*
- *Sub-versions of Reading;*
- *A Study of the Processes of Englishing the Bible*

Current doctoral research involves a study of Pound's Chinese poetry and translations, a study of cultural policy regarding the translation of Shakespeare in Malaysia, an examination of the work of C18th women translators, a study of African Lusophone translation, with a case study and a number of theses involving travel writing and translation, the translation of specific texts or authors from different periods.

Translation Studies Research: Some Categories

Given the quality of research that is steadily finding its way into print at the present time, we can safely affirm that Translation Studies as a subject is flourishing, despite the misgivings that some critics felt in the 1970s. It is also possible to categorise doctoral research under a number of headings, and I offer here some general categories, which other scholars will certainly amplify.

1. The first, and perhaps most widespread form of research is the detailed case study, which may consist of a translation, accompanied by detailed notes and commentary. The balance in such a study will generally be evenly weighted between translation work and notes and commentary. This kind of research may be carried out by individuals or by groups, of which the Göttingen group is a singularly successful example. Group projects can move from individual case studies into systematic investigation of interculturality.

2. A variant on the case study involves the detailed comparison of existing translations, rather than the production of a new piece of translation work. This type of research will also include notes and commentary. Often such research involves the study of translations that have been made at different points in time, so the weighting is likely to be towards the commentary, with the translations used as illustrative material.

3. An area of rapid development is the historical study, that breaks new ground in its explorations into the history of translation and translators. Such research may be narrowly focused, i.e. on a single author or text, or broadly focused to include an investigation of the translation strategies and policies of a group or of a period.

4. Research into the discourse of translators, into the rise of normative theories of translation. There is also a growing number of studies of philosophy and translation, problems of meaning, interpretation and relevance. There has also been a rise in the number of theoretical studies, sometimes accompanied by case studies, but generally drawing upon a selection of texts to illustrate theoretical discussion.

5. A relatively unexplored field is the study of the figurative language used by translators, as manifested in prefaces, essays etc. The pioneering essay in this area was Theo Hermans' (1985) piece on the figurative language of Renaissance translators, which has inspired a number of similar projects.

6. Genre-based and typological research. There is some interesting work being carried out in the field of children's literature, for example, and travel writing, sacred texts, advertising, women's writing and a whole range of text types, where translation questions can be located in a genre-specific or typological-specific discourse.

7. Research linking translation to other fields that are developing: post-colonial studies, gender studies, feminist theory, reader-response theory.

8. The communicative study, which explores communication models in relation to the processes of translation. The relationship between bilingualism or multilingualism and translation and the self-translator also provide rich ground for further research.

9. Computer aided research, that involves the building of a corpus of material for further analysis.

10. Translation and cultural policy. This is another relatively new field of study, but one with great potential, given the existence in many cultures of specific policies regarding the translation of texts. One obvious example is the case of Turkey, under Kemal Ataturk, which pursued a policy of westernisation that involved a huge translation programme.

11. Translation and the market. There is still a great deal of work to be done here, as the relationship between economic factors and translating is a vital one which has all too often been disregarded. Lefevere (1992) has drawn attention to the role of patrons, editors and publishers in the production and dissemination of translations

12. Translation as rewriting, as one of the ways in which a culture regenerates itself. At the other extreme, translation as a form of censorship, whereby texts deemed inappropriate or undesirable are censored through the actual process of being translated (see Bassnett and Lefevere 1998).

Problems in Doctoral Research

These twelve categories, which concern research into literary translation specifically, offer some sense of the range of work that is currently being undertaken. It is important, however, to highlight some of the problems that can occur in translation research, particularly at post-graduate level. Chief among these, which derive from my own work as teacher and examiner in institutions in many parts of the world, are:

1. The thesis that relies upon the co-operation of an author or publisher (s) .All too often, candidates endeavour to consult authors or publishers for information on the translation process, and either never receive a reply or receive an inadequate one. There have been cases where a thesis has had to be abandoned, because it was dependent on material information to be supplied from elsewhere. This is a problem that needs addressing from the outset.

2. The thesis that relies heavily upon questionnaires to authors, translators, readers or publishers. Many translation scholars have no training in producing questionnaires, which is a skilled activity, and the results obtained through this means are often inadequate. Where a questionnaire is thought to be necessary, there should be some formal training in how to produce such a document.

3. A common device is for the PhD title to propose itself as “Towards a Theory of...” This all too often disguises the fact that the thesis is not theoretical but is descriptive, with aspirations to theory. The candidates can then find themselves caught between discourses, with negative results.

4. The most common problem with doctoral theses in Translation Studies is limited knowledge. If a doctoral thesis is going to examine the translation of a prose text, for example, then some knowledge of narratology, of stylistics and of reader-response theory is important. Translation Studies researchers cannot afford to be blinkered, since examiners require evidence of systematic thinking.

Assisting Research

Translation Studies may have come of age, but there is still some way to go before it is recognised as holding the same status as literary criticism. The proliferation of journals and symposia in the past decade has obviously helped the situation enormously. The journal *TRANSST* provides vital information on forthcoming events, but many post-graduate students, who are producing first class research, are not working in departments of Translation Studies, but are tucked away in departments of Modern Languages, English, History, World Literatures etc. and often feel isolated. It would be of great benefit to have an easily accessible register of translation research, that could be readily updated, and at the time of writing, the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia is hoping to put just such a plan into effect.

It is also time to bring translators who earn their living through translating more frequently into contact with translation scholars, (usually also practitioners). This has begun to happen to some small degree, and scholars like Marilyn Gaddis Rose in the United States have done a great deal to bridge the gap between academia and practitioners. A research network could also be linked to a regularly updated register of translation projects commissioned by publishers, which would have the double function of providing information and

assisting with sales by pre-publishing promotion.

I feel very hopeful about Translation Studies at the end of the twentieth century. We have come a long way, and the dismal days of the translator as second-rate, second-class writer are behind us. Translation is of vital importance today, because as Paz (1992:152-62) suggests, translation both overcomes differences between cultures while revealing them more fully, and we need to be aware of those differences in order to deal with them. And Paz goes even further: he portrays the world as a growing heap of texts, “translations of translations of translations” none of them unique because they are all in some way translations of something else. It is a sustaining thought: translation is inevitable, all translations are originals and all originals are translations. The old hierarchies are dismissed and the translation, as Walter Benjamin so beautifully tells us, gives life to texts that otherwise would have rotted away into oblivion.

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